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Kramer, Martin
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a great need, for informed civilian discussion of military policy, but strategy and tactics are and should be the business of professional soldiers. Colonel Summers's book indicates that the armed forces are perfectly capable of producing lucid and literate strategists. One may disagree with his conclusions, but one hopes that there are more like him.

Arabs Against Themselves

THE ARAB PREDICAMENT: ARAB POLITICAL THOUGHT AND PRACTICE SINCE 1967. By FOUAD AJAMI. *Cambridge University Press. 220 pp. $19.95.*

Reviewed by MARTIN KRAMER

THAT the Arabs share a predicament seems at once implausible. Some grow impoverished, others wax rich. Some are caught up in world politics and markets, others cannot imagine what lies beyond clan or village. A great majority profess Islam, but others have succumbed to rational doubt. They inhabit a score of kingdoms, emirates, and republics, most of which have met and withstood repeated plans for amalgamation. The Arabs are a nation, but a divided nation. Each part grapples with a very private predicament, which it not uncommonly seeks to inflict upon the whole.

Is there more than an aspiration for hegemony and a propensity for internecine strife that binds the Arabs? Unlike the two peoples between whom they are wedged, and with whom they share a common legacy, the Arabs are hesitant. The Turks elected thorough secularization, democracy, and Westernization, and most Arabs looked on in awe and consternation. The Iranians have now chosen radical Islamization, hierocracy, and disavowal of the West, and most Arabs again watch in awe and consternation. They waver between difficult choices, while claiming a rare capacity for reconciling all competing claims in their own way. Some are not quite sure about the strictures of socialism, and so elaborate an enigmatic Arab socialism that recognizes no conflict of class. Some are not really certain about the merits of representative democracy, and so tell themselves and others that they have improved upon it to arrive at a desert or Arab or Islamic democracy, unencumbered by parliamentary institutions. Some fear the dislocations of revolution, and so evolve a doctrine of Arab revolution which manages without a revolutionary social program.

It is Fouad Ajami's premise that this "hybrid of cultural and technological mimicry with regressive social institutions" is not viable, and that "it is the lot of the Arabs to make their choices in the eye of the storm. Their world has become too pivotal to be left alone." That world, set "so close to the fire," is all too liable to come undone tomorrow.

This is by now a familiar format, the compedium of judgments and insights on a thwarted people by a troubled native son. V. S. Naipaul's work set the guild's literary standards and defined its themes. Here, too, the argument is essentially Naipaulian: "Neither large wealth nor displays of traditions will arrest the drift toward disorder in vast stretches of the Arab world. Wealth has only underlined a painful gap between what a society can buy and what it can be." Note that it is disorder, not revolution, which awaits the Arabs. In disorder, one can still equivocate; the Arabs have been more confident of their ability to contain Lebanon's lingering civil war than Iran's revolution.

But it is the Lebanese deadlock, the probability that it will widen to embrace other Arabs, which shadows this account. Ajami was born in Arnoun, a village in southern Lebanon four miles from the border with Israel, now set right in the crucible. That accidental credential, and his own talent, have brought him to Johns Hopkins, the New York *Times*, Chatham House, and the Council on Foreign Relations, where he teaches and appears not only as an authority on the Arabs, but as an Arab authority on the Arabs. There is a difference, and given Ajami's affirmation in his preface that this is a personal document, allowances must be made for his own predicament, for it has affected this statement in a subtle fashion.

AJAMI calls his book a "chronicle of illusions and despair, of politics repeatedly degenerating into bloodletting," and so he appropriately begins with a murder, that of a prominent if not very principled Lebanese journalist. Salim al-Lawzi, the editor and publisher of an influential Arabic periodical in London, arrived in Beirut in early 1980 to attend his mother's funeral. There he was abducted, secretly executed, and his body discarded outside the city. In light of his unconcealed opposition to the Syrian presence in Lebanon, suspicion naturally fell upon Syrian agents, and here it is worth supplying a grisly clue which Ajami for some reason omits: the flesh of Lawzi's right hand had been burned off with acid. "The world can be read into small events," reflects Ajami on the murder and mutilation, and the opening is a highly personal musing. In Lebanon and Syria, the threat of physical violence is brandished precisely against journalists and writers with whom this book often expresses so close an affinity of ideas. Later we also learn that Iraq, a state "bent upon entering the nuclear age," "strictly regulates the usage of privately owned typewriters. Only friends of the government are given licenses to acquire them. Typewriters smack of political freedom, of pamphlets and agitation." Rule or die, Ajami submits, is the credo of the Arabs, and writers flatter rulers or risk retribution. There is no rejoinder to the bullet book review, no middle ground upon which this author and others of outspoken opinion might have stood. When they can, they flee, swelling the ranks of Arabs in exile.

Ajami knows what does not explain his own estrangement or the tragic circumstances in which so many others now find themselves. One reads no indictments here of the triumvirate of colonialism, imperialism, and Zionism. No accusations are leveled against Free-

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masons, foreign spies, or fifth-columnists. The Arabs themselves, Ajami reasons, are at the root of their own disorder. "The wounds that mattered were self-inflicted wounds. The outside world intruded, but the destruction one saw reflected the logic of Arab history, the quality of its leadership. . . . No outsiders had to oppress and mutilate. The whip was cracked by one's own." These have been the wages of independence.

IN THREE essentially distinct essays, Ajami explores the intellectual and political aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, Egypt's recent vicissitudes, and finally the rise of Muslim fundamentalism. The first chapter remembers the period of introspection and ferment which followed the 1967 defeat, drawing examples from the writings of a radical secularist, a disaffected Arab nationalist, a radical fundamentalist, and two conservative fundamentalists. "There was no place to hide; men had to contemplate where they had been and what it all amounted to." And the day belonged to brutal iconoclasts who expressed, for the first time, well-argued doubts about Islam, Arabism, and the quality of Arab politics. One of the most accomplished of contemporary Arab poets insisted that "societies that modernized did so only after they rebelled against their history, traditions, and values," and that the Arabs were simply "not up to the level of the revolution." A Yale-educated professor of philosophy and scion of a great and old Syrian family lamented that the Arabs "have made room in our lives for the refrigerator, the television set, oil wells, MIG airplanes, the radar . . . but the mentality that uses these imported products remains the same traditional mentality that belongs to bedouin, agrarian supernatural stages that preceded the industrial revolution." A fallen veteran of the Syrian Ba'th party argued that the struggle for power in his country was one between "primitive tribes," and that his own faction was "the latest version of backwardness, a tragic expression of it . . . nothing was resurrected with us—in power—but the age of the Mamluks." Ajami's own sympathies lie just below the surface of the narrative. While he complains of the "lamentable quality of secular discourse" among the Arabs, the iconoclastic critique, shorn of its excesses and wedded to a certain pragmatism, is his own.

But more war and much more wealth, the yields of October 1973, were read differently by other Arabs. It is a renascent Islam that is the mark of this decade in Arab politics, either in the patient "tradition-mongering" of the Saudis, or in the impatient "hyper-authenticity" associated with opposition and assassination. All this leads the author into unfamiliar quarters. Suspending his distress, Ajami works hard to invest the fundamentalist argument with credibility, and his spokesman for the radical Muslim critique, Muhammad Jalal Kishk, is eloquent in this summary. Kishk is an Egyptian who has written works concerned with the malignant cultural influence of the West and ways to shut it out. "The virtue of Kishk's analysis," contends Ajami, "was to demonstrate that traditional thought can be penetrating and unapologetic and can be turned on social and political problems without excessive piety."

This is in fact the virtue of Ajami's paraphrase of Kishk, for to get any sense out of it at all, he has had to prune the various fundamentalist arguments of that attention to unseen forces which explains much of their appeal. In a word, contemporary fundamentalism is a theory of conspiracy. The West is pursuing a veiled offensive through every possible agency, from cinema and television to Orientalist scholarship, and Muslims, in turn, must conspire with the unseen power of a merciful God or face extirpation. The true nature of this struggle is apparent only to initiates. Such a rage, wholly shared by Kishk, cannot be made penetrating. It thrives on faith, fear, and nescience.

AJAMI'S method is at fault here. His is a bias toward the articulate, and his sources are publishing intellectuals. Where their thoughts are disjointed, as they often are, he tidies them. Naipaul, in his very

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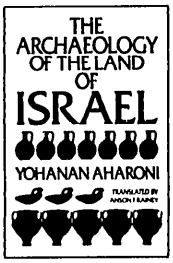

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different impressions of Muslim fundamentalism (*Among the Believers*, 1981), relates precisely what he heard from mullahs and the lesser faithful, and produces an account that rings authentic in conveying the panic and bluster of it all. Much of the dialogue is disturbing, and Naipaul does not conceal his alarm. "Instead of trying to understand these people," complains Ajami elsewhere, "Naipaul is ready to judge them. In his desire to discover their hidden vulnerabilities and point out their contradictions, their need for outside goods and outside approval, he tends to miss the drama and the real meaning of their situation." But here it is Ajami who, in pursuit of understanding, transmits only those parts of the fundamentalist argument with which he is at all capable of empathy. He withholds the conspiratorial eschatology, which is beyond his comprehension, and those contradictions that he cannot resolve. Ajami is too anxious to interpret, too ready to infer, and his paraphrase is a disservice.

THE choice of Egypt for a comprehensive inquiry is already a form of homage: "On Egypt's performance —sometimes a desperate trapeze act—other Arabs have been and remain fixated, applauding at times, full of derision at other times." Palestinian misadventures and Saudi deals, Iraqi bluff and Libyan mischief, for all their theatricality, are but sideshows. This is the book's most unsettling piece of analysis, written before Sadat's assassination and Mubarak's groping for an Arab reconcilation. "Something about Egypt has always driven its rulers to entertain ambitions that end up breaking the back of their societies," and Sadat was no different. Ajami found his particular "epic" a "nauseating pretension . . . awaiting its death, as less sophisticated, less polished people—claiming authenticity, more connected to the earth—push it into its grave," and maintains that Egypt cannot wholly escape that certain disorder in store for the other Arabs.

Now whether Egypt will crack under the combined weight of a failed economy and religious extremism no one can tell, and Ajami offers no more than a premonition. He does not know the traditional quarters of Cairo or the provinces, upon which so much hinges, as well as he knows the publishing intellectuals, who are uncertain barometers. Yet he has offered a sensitive account of the Arab fascination with Egypt and Egypt's ambivalence in its relations with other Arabs. Ajami belongs to a young generation of Arabs who kept the radio dial always tuned to Nasser's incendiary "Voice of the Arabs," a generation for whom there was no serious cultural or political center other than Cairo. Then they wanted terribly to believe that Sadat's embrace of the West and abuse of the Arabs went against a deep grain, that they had not been orphaned. Saudi Arabia, which Ajami finds "inarticulate" and "hopelessly corrupt," could not fill the void. Other Arabs are plainly obsessed with Egypt's choices, and Ajami is an incisive guide to that obsession, for he has shared it. And it must be said that his premonitions have been partly borne out.

"ALMOST every great upheaval that brings a world close to ruin is immediately preceded by a wave of cultural reassertion, by insistent traditionalism." That tradition, briefly grown to grotesque proportions, must ultimately collapse: "Then reality will intrude and shatter the illusion. Men cannot indefinitely live on frenzy or be kept in a trance." Ajami finally betrays a vestige of optimism. From his American ark, he anticipates both the flood and the olive leaf, and resists a Naipaulian finale. With an admission that "theirs is not a self-completed world," and a greater display of political acumen, the Arabs might still avoid the most harrowing scenario. But while the Arabs yet dread their future, so too must those who rely upon them. Following *The Arab Predicament*, none should be permitted to claim, as it was said of Iran, that we did not know; only that we did not believe.